

Assigned to: _____

Prospective RM: YES NO

Project No: 9993

Contract No: _____

Task Order No: _____

RAND DOCUMENT

BETTING ON THE THIRD WAVE

Daniel Ellsberg

October 11, 1968

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BETTING ON THE THIRD WAVE

In early March I expressed, fairly widely, a number of forecasts about the impact in Vietnam of the Tet offensive (D-16823-ISA). Most of the developments I described -- which I saw as dire, and possibly decisively damaging to US/GVN efforts -- were seen not as immediate, unconditional consequences of the Tet offensive itself, but as conditional consequences of a renewed, "second-wave" offensive by the VC/NVA on the same scale as in Tet. I did expect such an offensive, with high confidence, probably, as I saw it then, within a month or two.

Neither a renewed offensive nor the consequences I depicted were accepted as likely in Washington at the precise time I made those predictions. However, it so happened that judgments from the field and official estimates changed rather abruptly within a week or so later, in line with the tone of my forecast. By the end of March, this feeling had deepened and spread in acceptance to the point that it undoubtedly contributed to the President's decision to end most of the bombing, enter negotiations, and not to seek renomination. (These decisions themselves -- which I certainly did not foresee -- probably did affect the later events I was trying to predict, but in ways that still are mostly obscure).

By late March, testimony from friends in Vietnam and Washington had convinced me that a major offensive was not to be expected till June, or later in the summer; but from April on, I continued to believe (on evidence that the VC/NVA should be ready by June) there would be such an attack during the summer. Meanwhile, official opinion in Washington fluctuated. In April, I understand, I was again in a small minority, as optimism returned; but in May and June, official forecasts returned to predictions of imminent attack. (The May offensive was much smaller than what I was expecting; in retrospect, it seems to have been more ambitious than it looked, but it was premature and abortive). By June, most evidence seemed to support my expectation of a larger attack, soon, though John Vann's and Ted Serong's opinions --

to both of which I customarily give great weight -- were contrary.

This matter of timing was relevant to the domestic political process. I frankly thought that by the time of the conventions -- coincidentally, since I never thought the Communists would be strongly influenced by hopes of affecting the nominations or even election -- the prospects in Vietnam for our current policies would appear ruined and hopeless. But that is not, obviously, the way things worked out.

Well, would you believe by the time of the election? The Inauguration? These questions remain relevant: not only, of course, to U.S. domestic politics. I expose the dimensions of my own current state of uncertainty in Appendix B.

In June, I happened to express my earlier views to Oscar Gass, who was visiting RAND, and since he disagreed -- as I remember, he expected slow progress over the next several years (unless we collapsed at home) or at worst, "more of the same" -- he urged me to write down my predictions and review them September 1.

On September 1 -- revealing a mind and a way of life orderly beyond comparison with mine -- I received a reminder from him (Appendix A). In my (less prompt) answer I addressed some issues associated with my earlier forecast of another big, or "third-wave" Communist offensive. I did not take up again all the issues raised in D-16823 concerning the impact of such an offensive, nor is my reply anything like a comprehensive discussion of his question, "Why was I wrong?"; but there may be interest for some RAND readers in the limited exchange. And I don't mind taking occasion to go on record once more (even with guesses that are much less sure than before). I still think it's a healthy exercise, in our line of work. Some you win...

APPENDIX A

OSCAR GASS Consulting Economist
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ADAMS 4-5332

August 29, 1968

Mr. Daniel Ellsberg
Economics Department
The RAND Corporation
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Santa Monica, California

Dear Mr. Ellsberg:

As you will recollect, when I was last at RAND (in the week beginning June 17), we had some discussion of the outlook in Vietnam. On the basis of your long acquaintance with the question, you made a number of forecasts. Generally, a forecast of what would happen there in each future quarter. And, more particularly, a forecast of what would happen in the next two months -- this one also specially pinpointed on Saigon.

As you will also remember (and as noted in my letter of June 25), I prevailed upon you to extend the period of the first forecast until September 1. And you agreed to set your June views down in writing -- for your own possession -- to prevent that erosion of precision by protective memory which causes historians to regard autobiography (in so far as it relates to pre-publication times) as a dubious class of historical document.

When you receive this letter, we shall be at September 1. I would accordingly now much appreciate having your retrospective evaluation. I see the issues in three broad groups, which I have marked I, II and III below. But you will, of course, categorize your evaluation as you think most meaningful.

I Substantive accuracy of forecast

Do you regard your forecast of mid-June as having turned out to be 10% correct, 50% correct, or would you regard some other value -- between zero and one hundred -- as most nearly expressive of the rightness to be attributed to that judgment?

II Sources of error in forecast

If you judge that there was an element of error, to what do you attribute that error?

- (a) Were you wrong in your assessment of the capabilities of the Hanoi-Vietcong forces?
- (b) Were you wrong in your judgment of their longer-run (say 2 year) intentions?
- (c) Were you wrong in your appraisal of their immediate (2 months) tactics?

III Future validity of such forecasts

If there was any error, either subject to analysis in the categories suggested under (a), (b) and (c) above, or in some other categories, what light does this error cast on the validity of such forecasts altogether? Would you now equally confidently make a corresponding forecast yourself for the next two months?

As you see, I do not enter into questions of future Vietnam policy, as such, though that need not prevent you from doing so.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Oscar Gass

Oscar Gass

APPENDIX B

The RAND Corporation

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Mr. Oscar Gass
Consulting Economist
1908 Que Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20009

Dear Mr. Gass:

Please forgive me for not answering your letter sooner. I must say I applaud the energy you devote to the social role of encouraging people to express their expectations and subsequently to confront them. Political science will develop, I believe, only if there is much more of this. Meanwhile, I am aware, one must overcome a great deal of resistance to get most political scientists to state forecasts explicitly, especially if they sense -- e.g., from the presence of a pad and pencil -- any possibility that they may later be held to account. I pride myself, however, on trying to learn from errors, my own as well as others', so I commonly pursue a kind of retrospection and self-examination that some of my colleagues regard as obsessive.

In this case, I had expressed certain expectations quite widely and firmly, not only to you, so the failure of my predictions is unusually well known. My prediction was of a reasonably well-defined event, though defined partly in subjective terms: "A VC offensive of roughly the same scale and at least the same dramatic impact of the Tet offensive." Since even the May offensive by the VC would only doubtfully fit this description, it is evident that nothing at all resembling this has yet occurred. Thus, on a scale of accuracy, I would have to put the "correctness" of the prediction at zero (though this is not, of course, in itself a judgment on the premises, evidence, or reasoning that went into the prediction).

It so happens that at the time your letter arrived, the newspapers were predicting the onset of a major "third wave" offensive, and if this had actually happened in the first week of September, on the scale I had foreseen, I would have regarded the prediction as essentially correct, since the exact dating of the forecast was, of course, fairly arbitrary. (I did not believe that DRV/VC timing would be strongly influenced by the date of our conventions, nor by hopes of influencing either nominations or election; there is a stronger possibility - see below - that they might want to move before a new administration takes office.) By this time, however, looking at the events not only of September but of August and July, there is no question but that my expectations as of June and earlier have been falsified. (Since I believe not only in making verbal forecasts,

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as do you, but in backing them with money -- so that neither party will later forget who paid whom -- I had to pay up to a RAND colleague on 2 September.)

It is still, I believe, too early to judge with any certainty the sources of error in my forecast, and thus to lay a basis for more confident predictions over the next few months. (I have seen no official reporting on intelligence estimates for the last six months, so all that follows is my own speculation, based in part on discussions with visitors from Vietnam and others.) Specifically, although I would give more weight than I did earlier to the possibility that VC capabilities were a decisive limiting factor on their tactics over the summer, I am not ready yet to accept that view entirely.

At least one analyst in whom I put a great deal of trust, and who has good access to the flow of information from Vietnam, has believed since early June that the VC were preparing for a major offensive which they would not launch until October or November. Documents and testimony from the VC indicate to most observers that the May offensive as too hastily launched, poorly carried out, and generally disappointing in its results. This analyst and some others inferred that they are preparing very systematically and carefully for the next offensive, and that a major effort was not to be expected during the summer, even though capabilities were considerable by June and were growing steadily.

In any case, "capabilities" must be measured in part against the Communists' needs for assurance of success; in this sense, the set-backs in the May offensive may well have persuaded the VC that they did not have the capabilities at that time (contrary to earlier hopes) of a high-confidence success without further preparation and resources. Moreover, their ambitions for a "third wave" offensive may be very high. All in all, this seems to me now the most likely explanation and forecast.

On the other hand, it is the view of some observers, including one in whom I have the highest confidence -- John Vann -- that the end of the Tet offensive left the VC with very low capabilities relative to pre-Tet, and that the abortive May offensive reduced these still further, so that they have been left with inadequate capability (especially in view of officer and NCO losses) even for a low-confidence attempt at a Tet-like success. Vann was predicting in June that they would make the attempt nevertheless, probably in June (he was mistaken) but that it would have almost no effect.

I would normally be very reluctant betting against Vann on Vietnam matters, so I was aware of possible risks in my position as early as June. (I have been careful to present Vann's views as a counter to my own, when giving advice this summer.) But I was sustained in my prediction, which really dated from late March, by word that civilian analysts in Washington had come to support it strongly and consistently in the subsequent period. Their record of forecasting -- unlike that of any of the operating agencies, civilian or military -- has actually

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been quite good over the last ten years (though they did not, of course, predict the Tet offensive). Since, as I understand it, they underlined both the capabilities and the intention of the Communists to launch a major offensive as early as May, and, as frequently indicated in the newspapers, reiterated this prediction with frequent intervals during the summer, I felt still on strong ground with my own forecast, despite my unease at the specific counter-testimony of Vann. (Other contrary opinions from civilians or military in Vietnam, on the limited capabilities of the VC, I tended to discount almost entirely, and would still do so; just as I drew little support from the occasional predictions by MACV that the VC attack was imminent.)

Perhaps regrettably, LBJ and Humphrey apparently came to share this belief that a large attack was likely by late July or August. I have been given to understand that apprehension of this event kept either of them from endorsing a total bombing halt in that period, though LBJ would have been tempted to do that to achieve a Summit meeting (before Czechoslovakia) and Humphrey tempted to win support at the Convention. If these accounts are correct, it would appear that any decisive limitations on VC capabilities for a major attack are not convincingly evident to the Administration or its major intelligence advisors.

At least one source of error in my earlier forecast can be identified with some confidence. It is pretty clear that the positive benefits of maintaining momentum (which I rated highly) were outweighed in VC eyes by the costs and risks of launching new offensives without more adequate training, organization and preparation. Almost surely, the coherence of ARVN and the GVN in a purely defensive role was greater than the VC had hoped or expected, and the tactical errors attendant upon rushing into battle (especially in May) without adequate briefing or preparation loomed larger than they had anticipated. At the same time, working to reduce the positive benefits, it occurs to me that the President's action of 31 March (cutting most of the bombing, ending immediate fears of escalation, and opening negotiations) may have seemed to Hanoi to reduce the immediate urgency of maintaining momentum or increasing the pressure on the GVN and U.S.: since some of the major goals of such pressure probably appeared to have been achieved. (However, I suspect that the DRV leaders may now feel they have been hornswoggled. They have not gotten in negotiations the concessions they probably hoped for after LBJ's gesture. Meanwhile, after getting Hanoi into talks without meeting their earlier demands of ending all bombing, LBJ must seem to them to have managed (a) greatly to reduce the pressure on the Administration to make major concessions; (b) to pressure the GVN into broadening and strengthening the civil administration : both gaining time for the Administration to pursue the war without making concessions. If they do see things this way -- which is a plausible way of seeing them -- one would guess that their incentives have been increasing since May or so -- after a possible decline in April -- to restore the pressure on the U.S. by confronting a new Administration, preferably just before it comes in, with a discouraging setback and an apparently hopeless situation.)

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Of course, in a very general sense, the easiest kind of error to make regarding Vietnam is to predict that given events will happen soon; to imagine that current processes will culminate, one way or another, rapidly or decisively. This error probably operated in my predictions this spring. A lesson that I draw from the last six months is that the forces tending toward stalemate in Vietnam are as strong as I thought them last year (i.e., stronger than I imagined briefly this spring). Precisely when their backs are at the wall, hard-core anti-Communist elements on the GVN side do demonstrate their size and commitment (and the mass of the population, as Vu Van Thai puts it, demonstrates their allergy to the Communists as well as to the GVN). In short, the GVN side, bolstered by the Americans, is not brittle or fragile, though it lacks the dynamic capacity to move out and establish even slow, assured progress. (This could also mean, among other things, that the non-Communist elements would not necessarily fragment or quit given American de-escalating initiatives, such as a total bombing halt, sizeable troop withdrawals, or more serious negotiations.) Moreover, I would guess that the resilience of the non-Communist efforts has been further improved by the broadening of the government that has taken place as a response to the onset of the Paris talks. So the odds seem smaller to me now (though not negligible) that we will be soon "released" from our involvement by the collapse of non-Communist efforts, even under attack.

As for my current expectations:

- a) I regard the future, over the next few months, as considerably more uncertain than it appeared to me last spring. But this is normal; the degree of confidence I felt last spring -- on a number of grounds, later strongly sustained by the civilian intelligence community -- was most unusual for me. (An earlier exception was my confidence in the general prediction, continuously since early 1966, that significant, lasting progress was not going to be achieved in the next six months). But currently, the opposing forecasts of many qualified observers make the immediate future even less certain than usual in my own mind.
- b) I would now give greater weight than before to the probability that Vann is correct and that VC capability for a major offensive has been sharply reduced, at least for the rest of the year. (Vann emphasizes: (1) VC losses, by deaths and, for the first time, defections, in officers and NCO's: these limiting not only operational capability but adaptability and the soundness of tactical planning; (2) the large and increasing relative role of NVA, in replacing VC losses; Vann -- more confidently than I -- expects these replacements to be significantly less effective in the populated areas of the South. In terms of raw manpower alone, most estimates agree that the losses from Tet and May have been made up.) Nevertheless, it still looks to me like even odds, or a

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little better, (perhaps 3 to 2) that there will be a major VC offensive, at least on the scale of the May attacks, or more likely, on a much larger scale, before the end of the year. (Unless LBJ halts bombing totally, which looks unlikely.)

(c) Again, I would put much higher than I would before the probability that this attack will be largely frustrated and disappointing to the VC. (Here Vann stresses the much heavier U.S. deployment around Saigon, and greater emphasis on patrolling and night action, introduced by Abrams. Attacks elsewhere, such as on Hue or Danang, or towns near the Cambodian border, might be much more successful, Vann believes, but less politically significant.) Yet I still regard such an outcome as less likely than not; i.e., it seems to me more likely that they will be generally satisfied with their results. Perhaps I am over-estimating the VC here, particularly their ability to learn from past errors, and under-estimating our own ability to foresee and adapt; and perhaps my current expectations suffer from inertial ties to my old ones. (On some points that inertia is rocklike; it will take a lot more than recent newspaper and official stories to persuade me that standard ARVN units fighting alone have improved as much as they suggest; or that pacification, as now conceived, has recovered -- if it ever will -- from Tet.) Admittedly, in any case, I am prepared to believe -- in contrast to Vann (though uneasily, at this distance) -- that the VC/NVA do have great capacity to learn and adapt over time, probably greater than ours, for comparable periods, even if they didn't show it in May; and that they may find even our denser deployment around Saigon to be more porous than we suppose.

If there is an attack, I would expect it to show some property significantly different from the Tet offensive. (E.g., it might utilize NVA forces more; perhaps even, for the first time, in the Delta.) In particular, I would expect a major attempt by the VC to design tactics that would provoke us into destroying major urban areas, despite our strong intentions (greatly emphasized by Abrams, in contrast to Westmoreland) to avoid doing so; this might involve saturating Saigon with large numbers of small sniper units. Also, a major campaign to assassinate anti-Communist figures in Saigon and other cities seems likely, comparable to the campaign in Hue during Tet. There might be a strong effort to keep the conflict going inside Saigon long enough for public demonstrations, this time, to be organized against continuing the urban destruction and the war. I would guess that all during the summer there has been a major, unprecedented effort to construct an urban organization for the VC, a feature that has so far been absent from the Second Indochina War. However, if the offensive does come as early as November or December, the Communists might well feel that the organization was not yet ready to surface or be used significantly; they

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might preserve it for later.

If the VC attack and they do demonstrate flexibility and considerable capability to learn, I would expect their efforts to be quite successful, including an ability to cause us to destroy much of Saigon. If, however, the offensive does not take place this fall (in which case I would conclude retrospectively that their capabilities had indeed been strongly curtailed by the earlier offensives), or if they try but fail decisively, my forecast would revert to that of about a year ago, pre-Tet: i.e., a prospect of a long-continued stalemate. The VC would probably set out to garner and consolidate the potential gains in the rural areas opened to them by the Tet offensive (apparently they have not yet moved systematically into those areas effectively abandoned by the GVN then; perhaps distracted by preparations for a renewed offensive), and to build up an urban apparatus. But meanwhile, if we showed signs of being able to last out such a stalemate for a considerable period, and especially (this is almost a prerequisite) if we reduce the cost to ourselves by major reductions in U.S. force levels (as Vann advocates) and a general improvement in tactics, the other side might show a much greater interest in a negotiated settlement.

Let us by all means renew this exchange in early December. Meanwhile, if you would care to record your own expectations over the next few months, or longer, I would be delighted to file them.

Yours sincerely,



Daniel Ellsberg

DE:ca